



# Tuning CO<sub>2</sub> electroreduction by facet-dependent metal-support interaction

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## ABSTRACT

Electrochemical carbon dioxide reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) helps to build a sustainable carbon cycle system. The selectivity and stability of CO<sub>2</sub>RR catalysts can be tuned by manipulating Metal-Support Interaction (MSI). Here, we conducted a theoretical and experimental research on the interaction between Ag nanoparticles and diverse crystal faces of Cu<sub>2</sub>O. It was found the strong electron transfer from Ag to (100) facet of hexahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O enabled the formation of charge-redistributed interface with positively charged Ag and negatively charged Cu<sub>2</sub>O, which was more favorable to the stability of integrated structure and CO<sub>2</sub>-to-CO catalytic process compared to Ag-decorated octahedral and dodecahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O with exposed (111) and (110) facets, respectively. Consequently, the composite of Ag on hexahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited an impressive CO Faradaic efficiency of 93%, surpassing Ag on octahedral and dodecahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O as well as individual Ag and Cu<sub>2</sub>O nanoparticles. This work provides an effective avenue to tune CO<sub>2</sub>RR process by interface engineering.

## 1. Introduction

Electrocatalytic carbon dioxide reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) into value-added chemicals and fuels holds promise in reducing the usage of fossil resources and promoting carbon neutrality [1,2]. However, improving the reaction activity and product selectivity of CO<sub>2</sub>RR in practical applications pose a significant challenge due to its complex multiple charge-proton-transfer processes and concurrent competitive hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) [3–5]. Considerable efforts have been devoted to ameliorate CO<sub>2</sub>RR sluggish kinetics and tailor product distribution by designing and developing electrocatalysts. Compositing metal-based nanomaterials with appropriate supporters can create featured interface with strong metal-support interaction (MSI) that may tune the electrocatalytic steps and products [6,7]. MSI can induce charge transfer and component interaction between metal and supporter which can not only stabilize metal species but also tailor the local electronic structure and coordination environment, thereby enhancing CO<sub>2</sub>RR performance [8–10]. For instance, MSI was able to endow Au-CeO<sub>2</sub> with abundant Au<sup>δ+</sup> species and oxygen vacancies which was in favor of CO<sub>2</sub> activation and formation of the key intermediate of \*COOH [11]. The Cu/nanodiamond interface strengthens CO binding and promotes the production of multi-carbon products (C<sub>2+</sub>) by reducing the apparent barrier for CO dimerization [12]. Therefore,

deliberate manipulation on MSI through precisely constructing catalysts should provide substantial possibilities to solve the issues in CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

MSI strongly depends on the state of supporters. As to one certain supporter, different exposed facets are associated with different atomic stacking forms and electronic structure which may affect interface structure and state of loaded metal species as well as catalytic property [7,13]. Previous studies have shown that the (100) planes of TiO<sub>2</sub> in Au/TiO<sub>2</sub> influenced the activation of O<sub>2</sub> and the formation and desorption of carbonates for CO oxidation [14]. Pt nanoparticles (NPs) loaded on TiO<sub>2</sub> (001) facet could more efficiently improve the photo-induced carrier separation efficiency than that on TiO<sub>2</sub> (010) facet in photoreduction of CO<sub>2</sub> to CH<sub>4</sub> [15]. Additionally, it was observed that the exposed (111) facet of CeO<sub>2</sub> nano-polyhedra could modulate the chemical state of loaded Cu NPs, leading to superior catalytic performance in aldehydes hydrogenation, when compared to the (110) and (100) crystal planes [16]. Although the interaction between metal and exposed facets of supporters in catalysis processes have been noticed, the corresponding research in the field of CO<sub>2</sub>RR is in its infancy. Ag-based materials are commonly used in CO<sub>2</sub>RR but still suffering the drawback of poor efficiency, low selectivity and high cost [17]. For enhanced performance and potential application, it is reasonable and of importance to employ a competent support to modulate their spatial locations and electron structures [18]. For that matter, Cu<sub>2</sub>O should be

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an appropriate supporter due to its low cost, favorable electron transport property and mature synthetic method that allows precise control of exposed facet [19]. Noteworthy, different exposed facets of Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibit specific atom arrangement, distinctive electronic structure and surface energy, which show great potential to tune the property and electrocatalytic ability of adjacent Ag species by MSI [20–22].

In this work, we adopted silver-modified cuprous oxides (Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O) as prototypes to investigate the Cu<sub>2</sub>O facet-dependent MSI and corresponding influence on CO<sub>2</sub>RR processes by first-principles calculations and systematic experiments. Specifically, Ag NPs were loaded on hexahedral, octahedral and dodecahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O (h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O) with exposed facets of (100), (111), and (110), marked as Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, respectively, which demonstrated different electron transfer properties and electrocatalytic performance. Among them, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited the strongest electronic interaction and displayed the most remarkable CO selectivity, as well as satisfactory structural stability. This work can offer an effective strategy to control the CO<sub>2</sub>RR performance of metal-supporter composites.

## 2. Experimental procedures

### 2.1. Materials synthesis

#### 2.1.1. Synthesis of Cu<sub>2</sub>O

Typically, h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O particles were synthesized as follows [22,23]. NaOH aqueous solution (2 M; 10 mL) was dropped into CuCl<sub>2</sub>·2 H<sub>2</sub>O aqueous solution (0.01 M; 100 mL) through a pipette. After stirring for 0.5 h, ascorbic acid (AA) solution (0.6 M; 10 mL) was added dropwise into the blue solution. The mixture was stirred for 3 h in a water bath at 10 °C and the solution gradually turned orange-yellow. The resulting precipitate was collected by centrifugation and washed with distilled water and absolute ethanol for 3 times respectively. Finally, the h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O product was obtained after drying under vacuum at 60 °C for 8 h. o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O was fabricated by the same method except for adding 4.5 g polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP, MW 30 000) into CuCl<sub>2</sub>·2 H<sub>2</sub>O aqueous solution and changing the bath temperature to 30 °C. d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O was synthesized by the same method of preparing h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O except for adding mixed solution of 4.5 mL oleic acid (OA) and 20.0 mL ethanol into CuCl<sub>2</sub>·2 H<sub>2</sub>O aqueous solution and controlling the bath temperature at 55 °C.

#### 2.1.2. Synthesis of Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O

For fabricating Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, 10 mg h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O was dispersed in 200 mL distilled water by ultrasonic vibration for 0.5 h, then sodium citrate aqueous solution (0.03 M; 2 mL), NaBH<sub>4</sub> aqueous solution (0.1 M; 0.7 mL) and AgNO<sub>3</sub> aqueous solution (0.01 M; 0.7 mL) were dropped sequentially into the vigorously stirred solution containing Cu<sub>2</sub>O particles. The color of the solution changed from orange to tan, indicating the formation of small Ag nanoparticles. As the reaction continued for 1 h in a water bath at 20 °C, the color of the solution gradually deepened, indicating the formation of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O [24]. Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O were synthesized by the same method. The Ag/Cu atomic ratios of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O measured by inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES) are 10.3, 11.2 and 9.7%, respectively. By adjusting the feeding amount of AgNO<sub>3</sub>, we obtained Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O with different Ag loadings, and the Ag/Cu atomic ratio measured by ICP-OES were about 5.2%, 10.3%, 14.5% and 19.0%, respectively. The size of Ag nanoparticles could be adjusted by varying the synthesis temperature to 0, 20, 40, and 60 °C.

### 2.2. Materials characterizations

The phase and structure of the materials were characterized by X-Ray Diffractometer (XRD, Smart Lab SE) with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda$ =1.5406 Å, scan rate =10° min<sup>-1</sup>). Scanning electronic microscope (SEM, Zeiss Gemini 300 SEM) was employed to determine the morphology of the

materials. Transmission electronic microscope (TEM) and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM, JOEL 2100 TEM) were utilized to identify the microstructures of different materials. The X-ray photoelectron spectrometer (XPS, ESCALAB 250xi) was employed to characterize the composition of the materials. All the XPS spectra were referenced to the binding energy of the C 1 s peak at 284.8 eV. The Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) method was performed to calculate the specific surface area of the materials. The Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR, Shimadzu IRTracer-100) was carried out to obtain the chemical bonds or functional information of different materials. The isotopic tracing test was performed on QP2020 GC/MS (Shimadzu) by using <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> as reactants under the same as test condition of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

### 2.3. X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS)

Cu K-edge X-ray absorption spectroscopy was performed at 1W2B beamline in the Beijing Synchrotron Radiation Facility (BSRF) in fluorescence mode, used a Si (111) double-crystal monochromator. Ag K-edge X-ray absorption spectroscopy was performed at BL14W1 beamline in Shanghai Synchrotron Radiation Facility (SSRF) in transmission mode, using a Si (311) double-crystal monochromator. In the testing, Cu-foil and Ag-foil were used to calibrate the energy respectively.

### 2.4. In situ Raman spectroscopy

Raman spectra were collected on a confocal Raman microscope (Jobin Yvon Raman spectrometer model HR800) with a 633 nm laser as an excitation source (100 ~ 3000 cm<sup>-1</sup>). The electrochemical test was performed in an electrolytic cell with three-electrode configuration (EC-Raman-H). A glass carbon electrode loaded with 0.5 mg cm<sup>-2</sup> catalyst, an Ag/AgCl (saturated KCl solution) and a graphite rod were used as working, reference and counter electrode, respectively. Nafion117 proton exchange membrane was used to separate the catholyte and anolyte. In the Raman test, CO<sub>2</sub>-saturated 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub> was continuously injected into the electrolytic cell at a rate of 10 mL min<sup>-1</sup>.

### 2.5. Electrochemical measurements

The electrocatalytic experiment was performed with an electrochemical station (CHI 760E) in a two-compartment electrochemical cell where the anodic and cathodic compartments were separated by a Nafion117 proton exchange membrane. Both anode and cathode chambers were filled with 30 mL 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub> solution. In the cathode chamber, the carbon paper loaded with 0.5 mg cm<sup>-2</sup> catalyst and an Ag/AgCl (saturated KCl solution) were used as working and reference electrode, respectively. A Pt foil electrode (3×1 cm; 1 mm thick) was used as the counter electrode in the anodic chamber. Before the test of CO<sub>2</sub>RR, CO<sub>2</sub> (99.999%) was continuously pumped into the cathodic electrolyte with an average flow rate of 30 mL min<sup>-1</sup> for 30 min. Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) curves were collected (no iR-corrected) at a scan rate of 50 mV s<sup>-1</sup> after the activating treatment of performing cyclic voltammetry (CV) for 20 cycles at a rate of 20 mV s<sup>-1</sup> at 0 to -0.5 V until the change in current was negligible using electrochemical station. CO<sub>2</sub> reduction products were collected by chronoamperometry measurement at constant potential for 1 h.

The gaseous products (H<sub>2</sub>, CO and other gaseous hydrocarbons) were quantified by an online gas chromatograph system (FULI GC9790PLUS) equipped with a flame ionization detector (FID) and a thermal conductivity detector (TCD). The following equation are used to calculate the Faradaic efficiencies (FEs) of gaseous products [25].

$$FE_{\text{gaseous}} \% = \frac{P_0 \times V_0 \times Z_i \times v(\text{vol}\%) \times F}{R \times T \times I \times 60 \left( \frac{\text{s}}{\text{min}} \right)} \times 100\%$$

Here, P<sub>0</sub> is the standard atmospheric pressure, V<sub>0</sub> is the gas flow rate,

$Z_i$  is the number of electrons transferred for the formation of certain gas products,  $v$  (vol%) is the volume ratio of gas products,  $R$  is the gas constant ( $8.314 \text{ m}^3 \text{ Pa mol}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ ),  $T$  is 298 K,  $F$  is the Faraday constant ( $96,485 \text{ C mol}^{-1}$ ),  $I$  is steady-state current.

The liquid products were measured by 600 M Hz  $^1\text{H}$  nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, and a certain amount of dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) was added as the internal standards. The following equation are used to calculate the (FEs) of liquid products.

$$FE_{\text{liquid}}\% = \frac{Q_{\text{liquid}}}{Q_{\text{CA}}} \times 100\% = \frac{2 \times N_{\text{liquid}} \times F}{Q_{\text{CA}}} \times 100\%$$

$N_{\text{liquid}}$  is the number of moles of liquid product,  $Q_{\text{CA}}$  is the total charge during electrolysis.

## 2.6. DFT calculations

All DFT calculations were performed using the Vienna Ab initio Simulation Package (VASP) based on the projector augmented wave (PAW) method. For the exchange-correlation energy, the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) functional at the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) level was used. A plane-wave basis set with the cut-off kinetic energy of 400 eV was used. The k-point sampling of the Brillouin zone was set as gamma only. The convergence criteria for the electronic and structural optimization loop were set to  $10^{-5}$  eV and  $0.02 \text{ eV/\AA}$ , respectively. A vacuum region of  $15 \text{ \AA}$  above slab was used to ensure the decoupling between neighboring systems.

The surface energy is a critical index of the stability of different facets, and the negative value always indicate a stable facet. All the possible facets of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (001), (101), and (111) facets are considered, as shown in Fig. S1. Finally, we selected the most stable models for  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (001), (101), and (111) facets for the calculations in our paper. The surface energy  $E_{\text{surf}}$  is calculated as

$$E_{\text{surf}} = E_{\text{slab}} - N \cdot E_{\text{Cu}_2\text{O}} - n \cdot \mu_x$$

$E_{\text{slab}}$  is the total energy of different  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  slab models with possible exposed atoms,  $E_{\text{Cu}_2\text{O}}$  is the total energy of bulk  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and  $\mu_x$  is the chemical potential of Cu or O atoms under different environment.  $N$  is the number of unit cell of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  contains in the slab model, while  $n$  is the number of Cu or O atoms which are less or more in the slab model.

The work function reflects the energy for an electron escaping from the surface of material to the vacuum, which could effectively criticize the ability of receiving and losing electrons. Work function  $\phi$  can be calculated as the difference between vacuum level  $E_v$  and fermi level  $E_f$

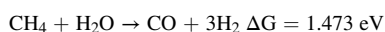
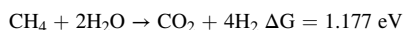
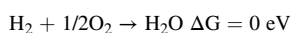
$$\phi = E_v - E_f$$

We calculated the work function for selected  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (001), (101), (111) faces, and Ag (111) facet.

The Gibbs free energies of reaction intermediates are calculated based on the computational hydrogen electrode (CHE) method, according to the equation as following

$$G = E + E_{\text{ZPE}} - TS$$

where  $E$  is the total energy of the system adsorbed with intermediates.  $E_{\text{ZPE}}$  and  $S$  is the zero-point energy and entropy of intermediates, respectively.  $T$  is the temperature, which are set as 298 K for all calculations. The values of  $E_{\text{ZPE}}$  and  $S$  can be obtained by vibration frequency calculation. All the free energies of the molecules and intermediates are calculated from  $\text{H}_2$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules from following reactions



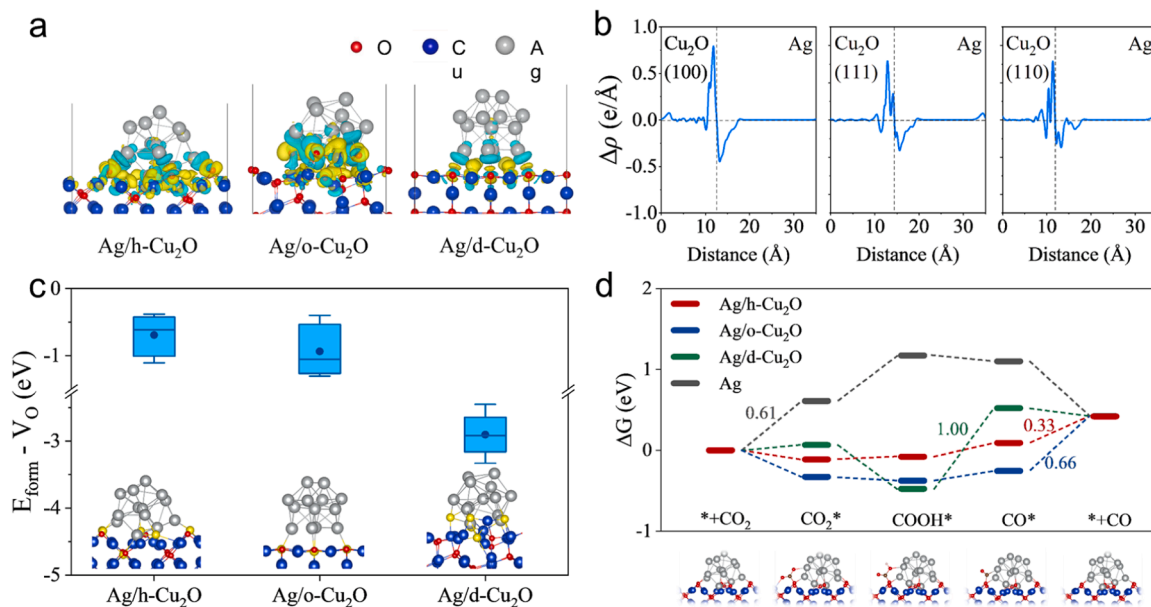
## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Theoretical calculation

We began by calculating the work function ( $E_{\text{wf}}$ ) of Ag and (100), (110) and (111) facets of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  to indicate the possible electron transfer properties at the heterogeneous interfaces. As shown in Fig. S2, the larger work function values of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  facets than Ag suggests spontaneous electron transfer from Ag to  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  facets when they are contacted. The electric potential difference between the  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (100) facet and Ag is approximately equal to that of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (111) facet and Ag, and apparently larger than that of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (110) facet and Ag, which implies that Ag can donate more electrons to  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (100) facet and  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (111) facet in comparison with  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (110) facet. The charge density differences of integrated systems are displayed in Fig. 1a. Stronger directional electron transfer from metal to supporter and more obvious covalent character are noticed on Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  in comparison with Ag/o- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and Ag/d- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  responding to more intense interaction between Ag and  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (100) facet. Furthermore, we calculated planer average charge density difference ( $\Delta\rho$ ), which is a quantitative measure of the charge reorganization in the combined system. As shown in Fig. 1b, the black line distinguishes the interfacial position between  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  facets and Ag, and the positive (negative) values of  $\Delta\rho$  signify electron density accumulation (depletion) patterns [26]. Significantly, more positive and negative peaks were observed for  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and Ag of Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  indicative of more pronounced charge reorganization with electron-rich  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and electron-deficient Ag induced by charge transfer from Ag to  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (100) facet. We also calculated the density of states (DOS) for the Ag on different  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  facets along with the pure Ag (Fig. S3). Interestingly, Ag presents nonmetallic character when loaded on the  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (100) facet, which is indicative of a strong interaction and substantial charge transfer between them. In contrast, Ag loaded on  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (111) facet shows mixing covalent and metallic characters while Ag on  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  (110) only demonstrates clearly metallic character similar with pure Ag cluster. These results strongly suggest that varying degrees of interfacial interaction can be achieved by attaching Ag to different  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  exposed facets in order of (100), (111), and (110) based on metal-supporter electron transfer.

To build optimized catalysts, structural stability should be an important consideration factor. The reduction of high-valence Cu species is generally existed in  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  by extracting coordinated O elements, which lead to the damage of initial structure and catalytic sites. Here, we calculated the oxygen vacancy formation energy ( $E_{\text{form-V}_0}$ ) to evaluate the structural stability of different interfaces. In Fig. 1c, the positions of box plots suggest the stability order of the Ag/ $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  interfaces is Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O} > \text{Ag/o-Cu}_2\text{O} > \text{Ag/d-Cu}_2\text{O}$ . More stable interface is beneficial for restraining catalyst reconstruction and improving catalytic selectivity.

Moreover, to unveil the role of facet-dependent MSI in  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  energetics, we calculated the adsorption behaviors of  $\text{CO}_2$  and step-by-step Gibbs free energies ( $\Delta G$ ) on different Ag/ $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  systems and pure Ag (Fig. 1d). The adsorption and activation of  $\text{CO}_2$  is of great importance for the electrochemical  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction reaction. Notably, the negative  $\Delta G$  values of  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption step for Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and Ag/o- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  composites indicate that these processes are exothermic and spontaneous. In contrast, Ag system exhibits positive  $\Delta G$  of 0.61 eV for  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption which is the rate limiting step. Especially,  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule can be bent at the interface of Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  while it represents a linear structure on Ag, suggesting that  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule is easily activated at the charge-redistributed heterogeneous interface (Fig. S4). The rate limiting step for Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and Ag/o- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  is CO desorption and corresponding  $\Delta G$  values are calculated to be 0.33 eV and 0.66 eV, respectively. The conversion of  $\text{COOH}^*$ -to- $\text{CO}^*$  is the rate limiting step of Ag/d- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  and relevant  $\Delta G$  is 1.0 eV. Accordingly, the occurrence of  $\text{CO}_2$ -to- $\text{CO}$  conversion is more favorable on Ag/h- $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  in energetics due to its lowest



**Fig. 1.** (a) The charge density difference of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O. Yellow and blue areas represent accepting and donating electrons. (b) The  $\Delta\rho$  diagram of three composites. (c) The  $E_{\text{form}} - V_0$  box plots at interfaces for three models, and all the possible oxygen vacancies at different interfaces are considered which are indicated as yellow balls. (d) Gibbs free energy landscape of three composites and Ag for CO<sub>2</sub>RR route to form CO. The corresponding adsorption configurations of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O are also shown.

$\Delta G$  of the rate limiting step, which correspond to a lower theoretical onset potential.

Thus, facet-dependent MSI of Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O catalyst systems was investigated by theoretical calculation, indicating that attaching Ag on Cu<sub>2</sub>O (100) facet could afford modulated electron structure, relatively stable geometric structure and optimized catalytic energetics for CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO.

### 3.2. Characterization and structure analysis of Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O

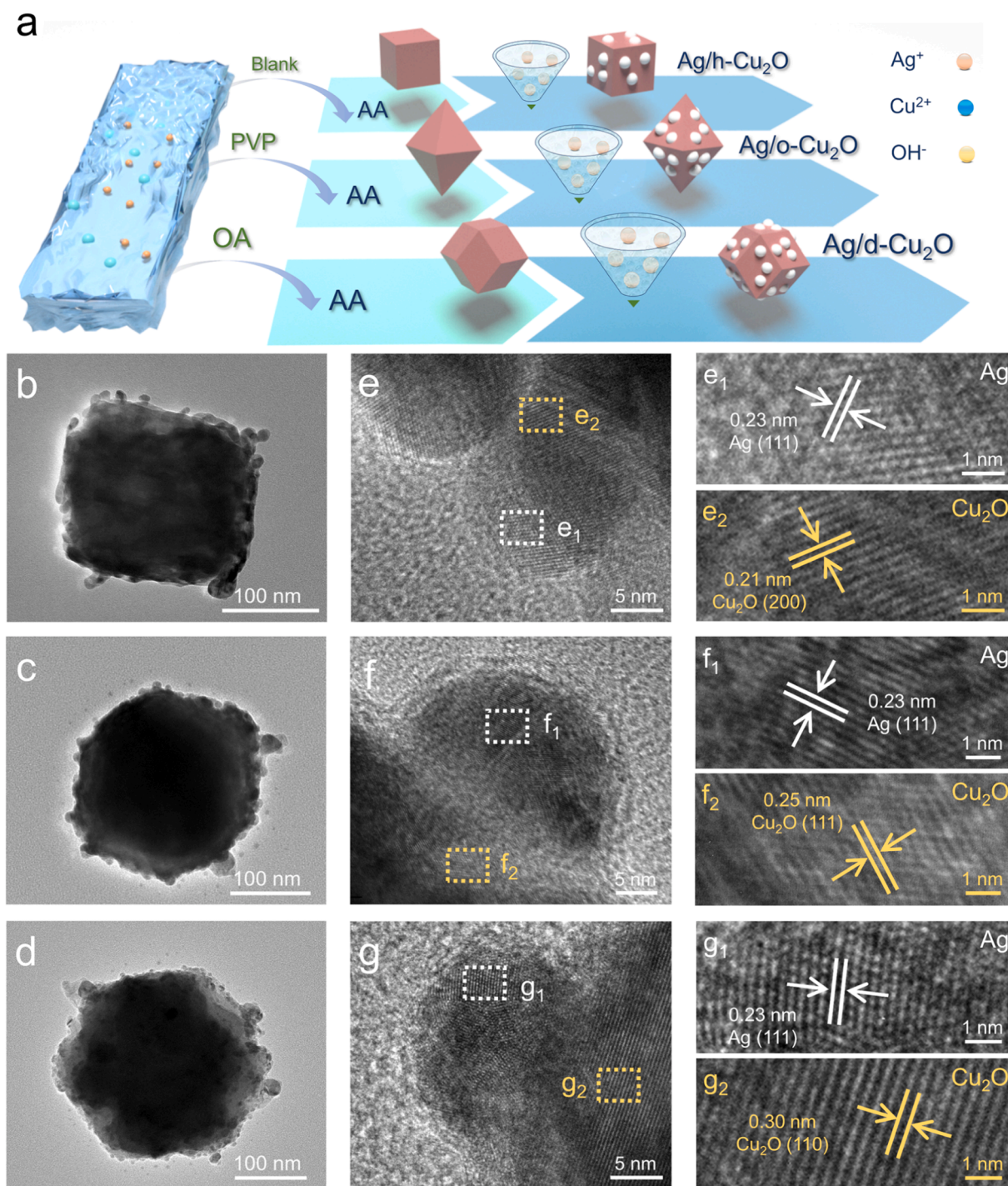
Inspired by the results obtained from DFT simulations, we undertook the preparation of various forms of Cu<sub>2</sub>O decorated with Ag. Initially, the ascorbic acid reduction method was employed to prepare h-, o- and d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O NPs with different exposed facets [27,28]. As shown in Fig. S5-S8, h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O in cubic shape with a particle size of approximately 200 nm was fabricated when none surfactant was added. In comparison, o- and d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O nanoparticles in similar sizes were obtained by using PVP and OA as surfactants, which demonstrated typical octahedral and dodecahedral morphology, respectively. The lattice fringes in the HRTEM images (Fig. S9-S11) further verify that the h-, o-, and d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O are enclosed by (100) facets, (111) facets and (110) facets, respectively [20,29]. The X-ray diffraction (XRD) pattern shows six different characteristic peaks at 29.6, 36.5, 42.4, 61.5, 73.7, and 77.6 ° corresponding to the characteristic (110), (111), (200), (220), (311) and (222) faces of Cu<sub>2</sub>O (JCPDS No.05-0667) (Fig. S12) [30]. FT-IR results excluded the existence of residual capping ligands on three Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials (Fig. S13). Afterwards, we utilized the sodium borohydride reduction method to deposit Ag NPs onto different Cu<sub>2</sub>O surfaces [31]. SEM images in Fig. S14-S16 shows that the as-prepared Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O inherited the profiles of Cu<sub>2</sub>O but exhibits uneven morphologies and the characteristics of deposited Ag NPs. The detailed heterostructures of Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O are demonstrated by TEM that Ag NPs with a diameter of 10–20 nm sporadically adorn the Cu<sub>2</sub>O surface (Fig. 2b-d and Fig. S17). The interplanar spacing distances of 0.23 nm points towards the Ag (111) facet, and adjacent regions demonstrate typical lattice spacings of Cu<sub>2</sub>O (100), (111) and (110) facets, which confirm the fact of Ag loading on different Cu<sub>2</sub>O NPs (Fig. 2e-g) [20,29]. The element mapping images further confirm the presence of the Ag on the surface of the Cu<sub>2</sub>O nanocrystals (Fig. S18-S20). The corresponding XRD pattern in Fig. S21

demonstrates the coexistence of Ag and Cu<sub>2</sub>O.

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) and Auger electron spectroscopy (AES) were performed on Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials to study the electronic structures of Cu and Ag. The peaks at approximately 952.5 and 932.7 eV for different Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials are ascribed to Cu 2p<sub>5/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub>, respectively (Fig. 3a). The oxidation states of Cu in three Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials are confirmed to be +1 by the characteristic peaks at 916.7 eV in Cu LMM AES (Fig. S22). The Ag 3d spectra of Ag NPs and Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibit two primary doublet peaks at ~368.2 eV and ~374.3 eV, confirming their metallic states (Fig. 3b). Notably, the Cu 2p and Ag 3d peaks of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O shift to lower and higher binding energy, respectively, in comparison with Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and pure hexahedral Cu<sub>2</sub>O. This suggested that the heterojunction Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O had strong electronic interaction and the electron transferred from the Ag to the Cu<sub>2</sub>O via the interface [32,33]. Stronger interfacial interaction should exist in Ag and Cu<sub>2</sub>O (100) facet for the more distinct peak shift, which is consistent with DFT results.

X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) was further applied to determine the local coordination environment and electronic structure of the catalysts. In Fig. 3c, the Cu absorption edges of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O are closed to that of reference h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O in X-ray absorption near-edge structure (XANES) spectra. In addition, extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) spectra of three Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O catalysts shows two characteristic peaks at 1.5 and 2.7 Å, which are coincident with those of Cu<sub>2</sub>O (Fig. 3d). These results demonstrated that the structure of Cu<sub>2</sub>O nanocrystals remains intact after decorating with Ag. Notably, the absorption edge position of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O demonstrates a slight downshift to lower energy compared with Cu<sub>2</sub>O, which should be attributed to decreased oxidation state of Cu caused by strong electron transfer [34]. As shown in Fig. 3e and f, the Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O composites exhibit similar Ag K-edge XANES and EXAFS spectra to pure Ag NPs and Ag foil. However, it should be noted that the Ag K-edge XANES spectra of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O gradually shift toward lower energies, which should be attributed to gradual weakening of charge transfer [35,36].



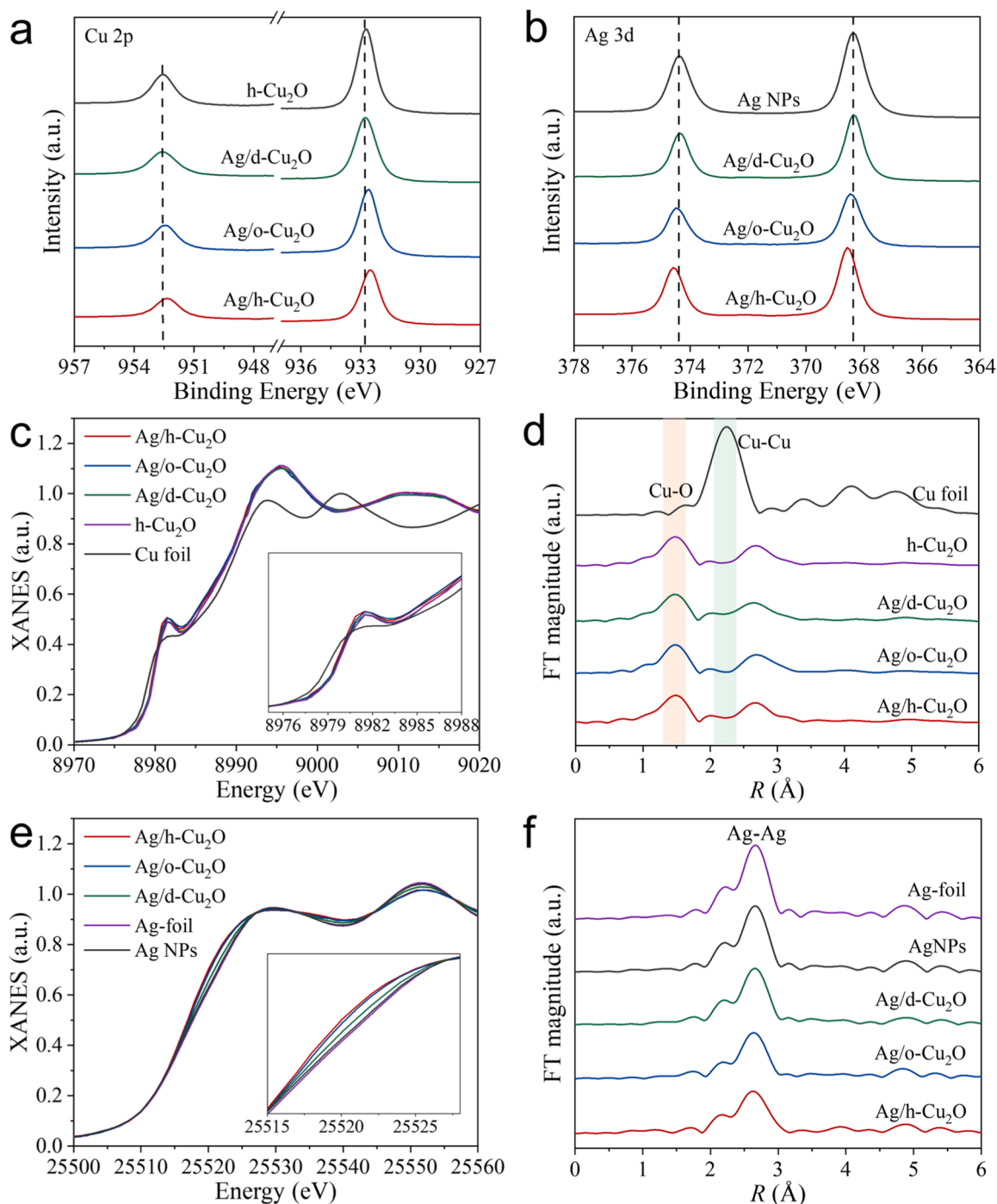


**Fig. 2.** (a) Synthesis schematic diagram for different catalytic materials. (b-d) TEM images and (e-g) HRTEM images of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, respectively.

### 3.3. Facet-dependent CO<sub>2</sub>RR performance of Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O

The electrochemical performance tests were carried out using a three-electrode electrochemical system in a Nafion 117 proton exchange membrane separated H-cell. Preliminarily, the CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity of our catalyst was confirmed by performing LSV on Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O in 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub> aqueous solutions saturated with Ar and CO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S23). Optimal Ag grain size and atomic ratio of Ag/Cu were determined to be 10–20 nm and ~10% for Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O (Fig. S24–S26). Subsequently, a series of materials were employed to investigate the influence of facet-dependent metal support interactions on CO<sub>2</sub>RR. According to the LSV

curves after the activation process, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited the lowest onset potential around  $-0.3$  V vs. RHE and the highest current density, indicating its superior CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics. Meanwhile, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O showed a broad potential of CO selectivity that CO Faradic efficiency ( $FE_{CO}$ ) exceeded 80% in the range from  $-0.76$  V to  $-1.06$  V and reached the top about 93% at  $-0.96$  V with a remarkable current density of  $6.5 \text{ mA} \cdot \text{cm}^{-2}$  (Fig. 4a). In Fig. 4b and Fig. S27, the FEs of products for different catalysts are presented. All the Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials exhibited inferior catalytic selectivity with a high-proportioned H<sub>2</sub> and several carbonic products including CO, HCOOH and CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>OH, which could be ameliorated by decorating Ag onto their surfaces. Importantly,  $FE_{H_2}$

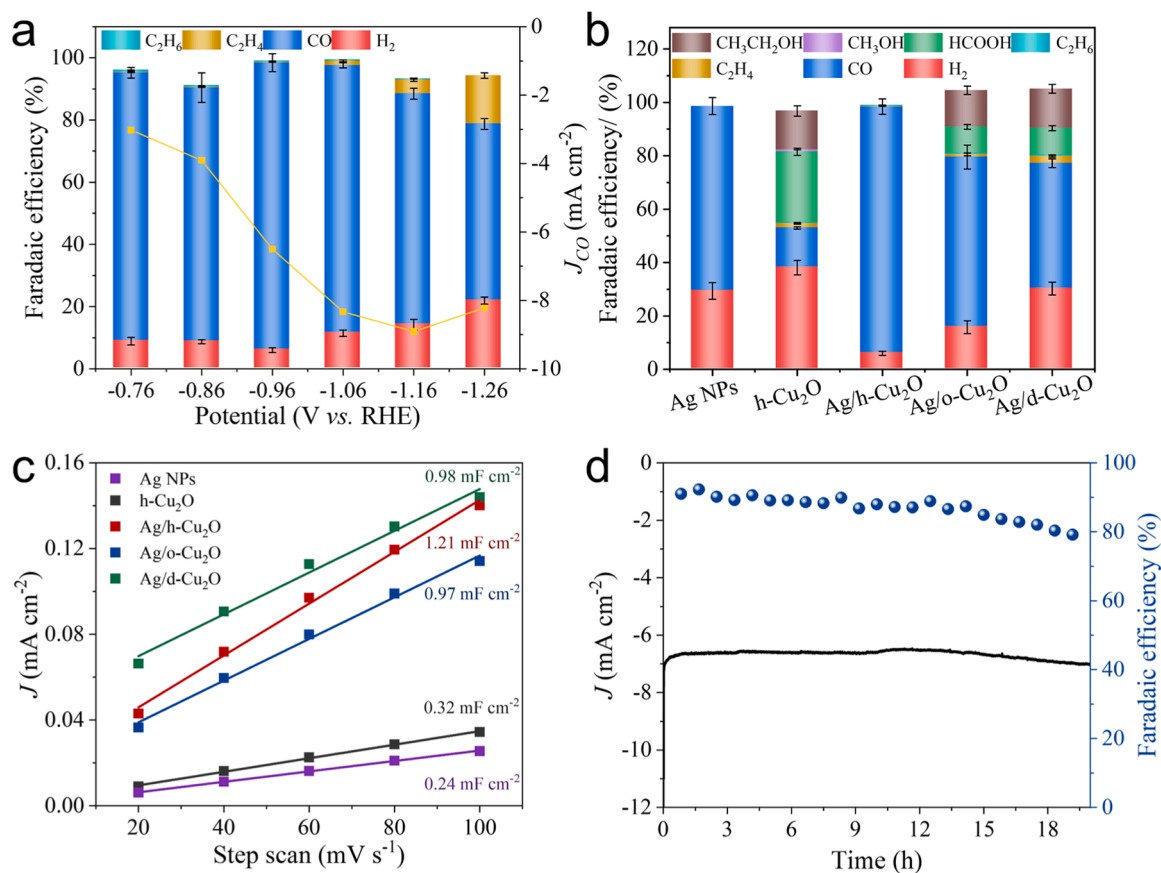


**Fig. 3.** Spectroscopic characterizations of different Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O materials and counterparts. (a) Cu 2p and (b) Ag 3d XPS spectra. Cu K-edge (c) XANES and (d) EXAFS spectra. Ag K-edge (e) XANES and (f) EXAFS spectra.

decreased and  $FE_{CO}$  increased in the order of Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, suggesting HER was suppressed and CO<sub>2</sub>-to-CO reaction was promoted as the interfacial interaction became stronger. As a result, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O displayed optimized selectivity to CO which is even higher than that of Ag NPs (69%) and in the front rank of the same kind materials (Table S1). Here, the influence of difference in specific surface areas of different materials on CO<sub>2</sub>RR performance can be excluded by BET analysis (Fig. S28). In addition, the isotopic labeling experiment over Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O catalyst was performed to verify the CO<sub>2</sub> as the only carbon source for carbon-containing products (Fig. S29).

Electrochemical active surface areas (ECSAs) of different materials were evaluated based on double layer capacitances of electrode, which

can be represented by the linear slopes of the charging current density differences plotted against scan rates (Fig. 4c and Fig. S30). Apparently, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O has a linear slope value ( $1.21 \text{ mF cm}^{-2}$ ) higher than those of Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O ( $0.97 \text{ mF cm}^{-2}$ ) and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O ( $0.98 \text{ mF cm}^{-2}$ ), and nearly 3-times higher than that of h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O ( $0.32 \text{ mF cm}^{-2}$ ). This strongly implies that Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O possesses a larger ECSA than counterparts and the decorating of Ag onto Cu<sub>2</sub>O can create more accessible active sites [37]. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was performed to investigate the charge transfer kinetics for CO<sub>2</sub>RR. As shown in Fig. S31, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O shows the smallest circle radius, indicating the lowest charge-transfer resistance and superior reaction kinetics [38,39]. The catalytic stability was determined through chronoamperometric



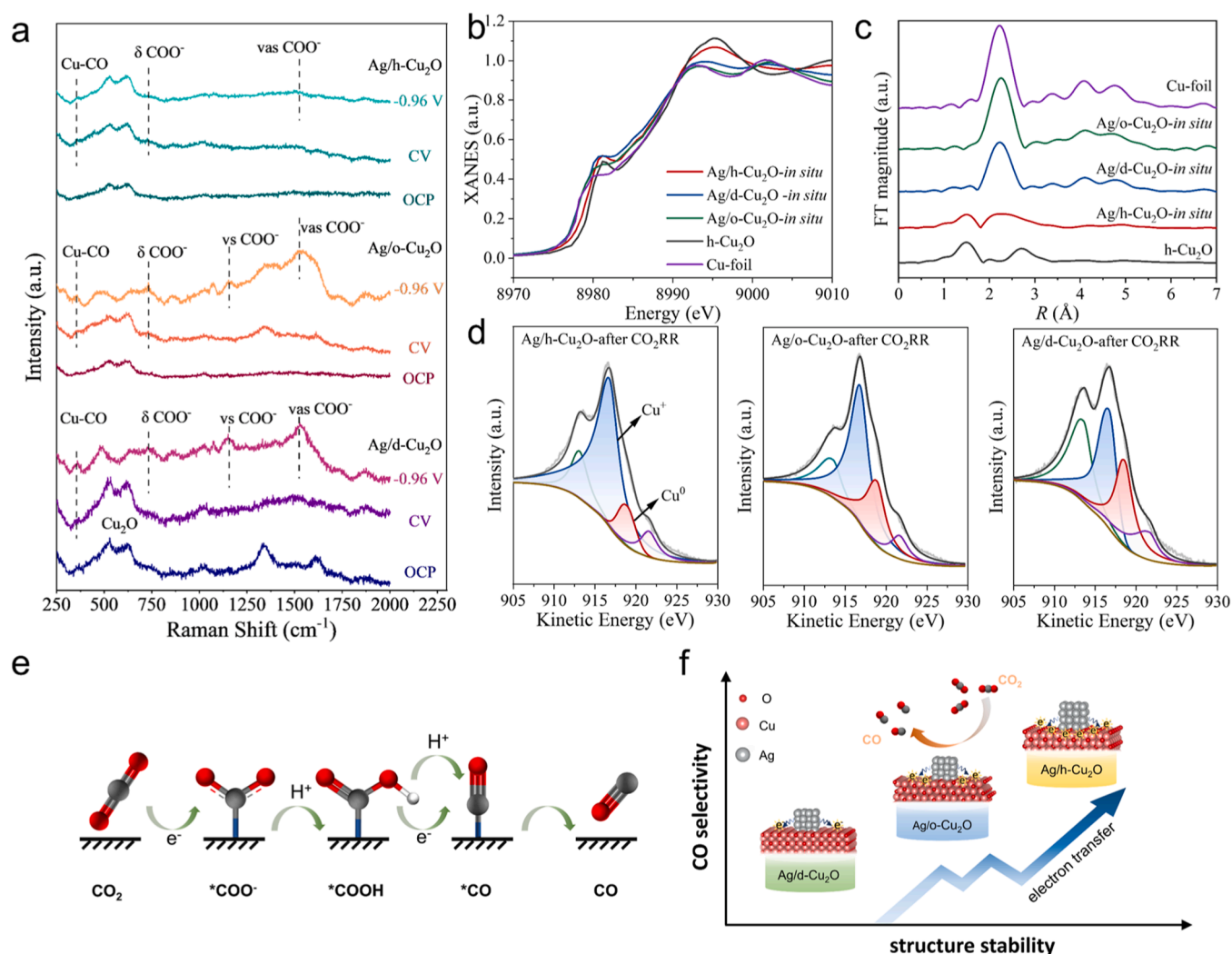
**Fig. 4.** (a) FEs and current densities of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR products on Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O at various potentials. (b) FEs of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR products on the prepared catalysts at -0.96 V vs. RHE within 1 hour. (c)  $C_{dl}$  fitting curves of different electrocatalysts in CO<sub>2</sub>-saturated 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub> electrolyte. (d) Long-term stability test for Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O electrodes.

measurements (*i*-*t*) under a constant potential of -0.96 V vs. RHE. Fig. 4d revealed that the FE<sub>CO</sub> of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O could be maintained above at approximately 80% over 20 hours of operation without appreciable decrease on current density, demonstrating its superior stability in comparison with Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O (Fig. S32). The observed long-term durability could be attributed to the structural stability induced by the strong interaction between Ag and Cu<sub>2</sub>O (100).

To realize the in-depth structure-activity relationship of CO<sub>2</sub>RR catalysts, we investigated the structural transformation of the catalysts in electrocatalysis processes. *In situ* Raman spectroscopy were employed to directly monitor their catalytic behaviors and reactive intermediates under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions (Fig. 5a). Initially, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited two peaks at 527 and 625 cm<sup>-1</sup> corresponding to Cu<sub>2</sub>O when the open circuit potentials were applied [40]. These characteristic peaks remained unchanged for three composites after the activation processes. Meanwhile, the peak at 356 cm<sup>-1</sup> assigned to Cu-CO stretching vibration appeared, which demonstrated the presence of adsorbed \*CO on Cu [40]. Once applying the potential of -0.96 V vs. RHE, characteristic peaks of Cu<sub>2</sub>O became ambiguous for Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, while they remained for Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, suggesting that the structure of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O was relatively stable even in a reductive environment. In the meantime, three peaks at 730, 1130, and 1530 cm<sup>-1</sup> were observed and assigned to \*COO<sup>-</sup> [41,42], which was an important intermediate for CO<sub>2</sub>RR. It should be noted that the COO<sup>-</sup> bands of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O were significantly lower than those of Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, indicating the rapid conversion of \*COOH to \*CO followed by the release of CO. To further gain insight into the changes in structure of catalytic materials during CO<sub>2</sub>RR, *in situ* XAS technique were used. As shown in Fig. 5b, the absorption edge of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O in *in situ* state (Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ*) located at between h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Cu foil, revealing

only partial reduction of h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O supporter during CO<sub>2</sub>RR. In contrast, after applying reduction potential, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* demonstrated similar absorption edges to Cu foil, indicating a significant fraction of Cu<sup>+</sup> was reduced to Cu<sup>0</sup>. The EXAFS data were shown in Fig. 5c to describe the coordination states of materials. It is evident that Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* exhibited negligible Cu-O scattering peaks at ~1.5 Å and prominent Cu-Cu bond scattering peaks at ~2.4 Å under the electrochemical condition, indicating o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O were mostly reduced to metallic Cu. On the other hand, Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* exhibited apparent Cu-O scattering peak and a broader peak from 1.8 to 3.3 Å which should originate from the joint contribution of Cu-Cu coordination in metallic Cu and Cu<sub>2</sub>O at the CO<sub>2</sub>RR potential. The curve-fitting analysis of FT-EXAFS (Figure S33 and Table S2) further showed that Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* exhibited an analogous Cu-O bond distance (1.86 Å) to h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and a decreased Cu-O coordination number. In contrast, the Cu-Cu bond distances of Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* and Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O-*in situ* are 2.53 and 2.54 Å in line with Cu foil. These results strongly suggested that Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O was partially reduced in *operando* electrocatalysis process consistent with Raman results. In addition, the surficial valence states of Cu sites in different catalysts after the electrocatalytic reaction were detected by AES, as shown in Fig. 5d. The surficial Cu/Cu<sup>+</sup> ratios of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O after 1 hour of CO<sub>2</sub>RR were determined to be 0.15, 0.41, and 0.80, respectively, suggesting the superior stability of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O. Moreover, the Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited surficial Cu/Cu<sup>+</sup> ratios of 0.19 and 0.24 after 3 and 5 hours of electrolysis (Fig. S34), confirming its long-time structural stability, which demonstrated advantage over some catalytic materials in other reports [43–46]. The well-maintained morphology, interfacial structure and content of Cu<sup>+</sup> species of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O after 1 hour electrocatalysis and long-time stability test also





**Fig. 5.** (a) *In situ* Raman spectra on Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O collected at open circuit potential (OCP), activation process (20 CV cycles from 0 to −0.5 V<sub>RHE</sub>) and the applied potential in CO<sub>2</sub>-saturated 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub>. (b) Cu K-edge XANES spectra and (c) EXAFS spectra of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions (−0.96 V vs. RHE in 0.1 M KHCO<sub>3</sub>) as well as counterparts. (d) Cu LMM Auger spectra of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O after electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR. (e) Schematic illustration for reaction path of CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO. (f) Structure-activity relationship between different Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O systems and CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

suggested its structural stability induced by strong component interaction (Fig. S35–S38).

The plausible catalytic reaction mechanisms accompanied by behaviors of catalysts were conjectured. As we know, except for producing formate, CO<sub>2</sub>RR generally involves the process of CO<sub>2</sub> → \*CO<sub>2</sub> → \*COOH → \*CO. Whereafter, adsorbed \*CO intermediate could transform into gaseous CO or undergo hydrogenation/C–C coupling to form CH<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2+</sub> products. In practice, the reactive selectivity and activity highly depend on the stability of integrated structure and the states of active sites. As proved by DFT calculations and experiment results, the strong electron transfer could stabilize the integrated configuration of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and suppressed drastic structural evolution. In contrast, both Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O underwent severe reduction of Cu<sup>+</sup> to Cu<sup>0</sup> and structural collapse due to their weak interfacial interaction (Fig. S39). The stable integral structure of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O provides a relatively well-organized platform with elaborate active sites for highly selective electrocatalysis rather than unpredictable catalytic matrixes and sites evolved from the unstable Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O. Meanwhile, the ability to form and stabilize \*CO<sub>2</sub> and \*COOH intermediates is crucial for an efficient catalyst, which can be assessed by adsorption of surface OH<sup>−</sup> [47]. The results of LSV measurements demonstrated that

Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited the highest OH<sup>−</sup> adsorption peak, suggesting that it had more optimized active sites for generating and stabilizing \*CO<sub>2</sub> and \*COOH intermediates (Fig. S40). The enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>-to-CO reaction energetics and charge transfer kinetics of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O should allow more electrons to be transferred to CO<sub>2</sub> rather than Cu<sup>+</sup>, thereby further solidifying its self-structure. Thus, the high electrocatalytic activity and selectivity of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O should be attributed to its relatively stable integrated structure and optimized active sites which originate from rational interfacial interplay.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, the study focused on the facet-dependent MSI and its roles in CO<sub>2</sub> electroreduction through the construction of diverse Ag/Cu<sub>2</sub>O prototypes. Specific charge redistributed interfaces can be created by electron transfer from Ag to different exposed facets of Cu<sub>2</sub>O induced by electric potential difference, which have implication for the stability of the integrated structure and catalytic kinetics. The elaborate heterogeneous interface of Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O could afford optimized active sites with pronounced adsorption capacity for CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and favorable catalytic energetics. Importantly, *in situ* experiments unraveled that Ag/h-



Cu<sub>2</sub>O exhibited the strongest MSI in comparison with Ag/o-Cu<sub>2</sub>O and Ag/d-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, which suppressed the dramatic structural evolution caused by reduction of Cu<sup>+</sup> under electrochemical condition. Consequently, the FE of CO production reached 93%, along with a partial current density of 6.5 mA·cm<sup>-2</sup> for Ag/h-Cu<sub>2</sub>O, surpassing its counterparts. This work provides a new sight into manipulating the MSI to enhance electrocatalysis processes.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Lidong Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Yuheng Wang:** Software. **Xiaoxue Xu:** Software. **Zhongfei Xu:** Writing – review & editing, Software. **Juzhe Liu:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Data curation. **Zhixiang Cheng:** Investigation. **Jimmeng Li:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Hanxia Chen:** Software. **Junpeng Zhu:** Investigation.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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### Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.apcatb.2024.124049](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2024.124049).

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